

COMMENTARY

WASHINGTON: TARNISHED SYMBOL

Our Capital's Treason Against America

DAVID AND ADELE BERNSTEIN

WASHINGTON is a delightful capital, if you do not look too far under its glistening surface. It has the grandeur that the French architect l'Enfant envisaged a century and a half ago, leavened by leisurely residential neighborhoods and a faint fragrance of the old South. Someone has called it a city in the country; its air needs no filter against industrial grime.

OUR nation's capital still prides itself on a certain graciousness of architecture and manners which is said to be its heritage from the Old South. But it is no secret, either to Americans or to the world at large, that it just as jealously cherishes an uglier part of that same social tradition—racism. Indeed, the report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights last year devoted a special section to this fact, and the press continues to report incidents of Washington's discriminatory practices. DAVID and ADELE BERNSTEIN here offer a detailed account of the operation and background of Washington's race prejudice, suggesting what new factors in the city's life may yet operate for improvement. Mr. Bernstein, after serving with the American Army in the Pacific, became special adviser to the President of the Philippines; this experience formed the basis for a book, *The Philippine Story*, published last year. For the past few years Mr. Bernstein has lived in Washington, serving frequently as a consultant to the government. Mrs. Bernstein was for some time a staff writer for the *Washington Post*, covering, among other things, the capital's community life.

People like Washington because they can feel close to the heart of world affairs and yet lead an easy social life without night clubs or exhibitionistic spending. The pushing and striving of bigger cities is not for Washington; its shops are not so crowded, its sales clerks not so rude, and one need not plan for weeks ahead to arrange a picnic in Rock Creek Park or a boat trip on the Potomac.

Newcomers, who arrived with the New Deal or with the war, settle comfortably into permanent residence. They are the principal source of the unprecedented home-buying boom of the past five years. Since 1940, they have swelled the capital's population by more than thirty-five per cent, from 663,000 to 898,000.

Nothing like this influx has happened to Washington since the Civil War (an event which, incidentally, had less effect on the nation's capital than on the South, which begins just across the river). The city, then, is due for as much of a change in personality as it has increased in size. The change is, indeed, badly overdue.

UNDERLYING Washington the capital is Washington the community. This community has little to do with the city of headlines—of presidents, senators, diplomats, cabinet members, lobbyists, and all the oth-

ers who manage the business of government. It has little to do, either, with the Washington of the society pages—the official wives, the social climbers, the embassy set, the army set, the horsey set, the cocktail party deadbeats. Neither should it be confused with Hollywood's capital of giddy government girls, slinking spies, and handsome statesmen.

Washington the community is the city of the "Oldest Inhabitants," the people whose roots were sunk generations ago when their forebears arrived in town to cadge jobs in the bureaus or the homes of the Madisons and Lincolns and Grants. In their unostentatious, middle-class way, they run the city today. They are its police force, its shopkeepers, its motormen, teachers, bankers, doctors, and cab drivers. Inevitably, they set the standards for the community.

Interestingly enough, foreigners in the capital seem better acquainted than Americans with these standards: Washington's disfranchised citizenry; the ugly segregation of its people according to color; its restricted neighborhoods for Caucasian Christians, preferably Protestant; its infantile cultural development; its suspicion of outsiders and new ideas. These attributes of Washington strike the foreigner forcibly because he sees, as an outsider, the contrast between America's protestations in her propaganda abroad and America's performance in her own capital; and also because the foreigner is sometimes in the victim's place himself.

A few weeks ago, the Minister from Ethiopia attended a convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Science at Constitution Hall (owned and run by the Daughters of the American Revolution), and was asked to change his seat. He assumed that he was being subjected to racial discrimination, and left the hall in a huff that reached the newspapers and distressed the State Department. As it turned out, there had merely been a ticket mix-up. But in no other capital of the world, except perhaps South Africa's Pretoria, would he automatically have assumed

segregation. In Washington it could be taken for granted.

IT COULD be taken for granted, because discrimination and narrow-minded parochialism surround all people in Washington, however transient. The city's one legitimate theater was changed this year into a segregated movie house because its owner, Marcus Heiman, rejected a demand from Actors' Equity that he admit Negroes to his audiences.

The heart of the community, which supported Mr. Heiman, is found in a dozen or so little-known neighborhood "citizens' associations"—Brightwood, Glover Park, Anacostia, Georgetown, Kalorama—all affiliated with the city-wide and all-white Federation of Citizens' Associations. These neighborhood groups are tightly controlled by the proper Washingtonians, and are in fact highly successful in getting the city more traffic lights, improved sewage systems and police protection, planned parking areas, and contributions to the Community Chest.

They also uphold restrictive covenants barring Negroes, Jews, Indians, or Orientals as home-owners in their sections. Last October, before the Supreme Court had handed down its decision outlawing these covenants, Clifford H. Newell, president of the Federation of Citizens' Associations, told one of the neighborhood groups: "If a colored person is unwise enough to move into your block, don't sell your home and move away. Social custom will assert itself, and I predict that after this agitation has expended itself, the colored man will want to sell back to his white friend and go back to live among his own people, where he can better carry out his obligations to his race."

This astonishing statement was followed by a still more astonishing proposal which Mr. Newell devised after the Supreme Court had acted in despite of Washington's "social custom." Addressing the entire Federation in June, he outlined a scheme to "replace" the now unenforceable covenants. On each block, one resident selected by the neighborhood association would hold

options to buy at the bid price any property put up for sale by its owner. Thus, once a home-owner had found a buyer, the "block captain" would have thirty days to investigate his prospective neighbor and, if he considered him undesirable, he could exercise his option and prevent the sale of the house. The plan, said Mr. Newell, "cannot be attacked" because "it makes no mention of race, creed, or color."

The ingenious proper Washingtonians support and, if necessary, enforce the exclusion of Negro children from any playgrounds and schools not specifically assigned to them. Negro facilities are notoriously inadequate in quality and number. But the Washingtonians who dominate the District of Columbia school board and recreation board will assure you that, dollar for dollar, the Negroes receive far more in benefits than they contribute to the District revenues. They have declared that local crime (the figures for which are soaring) is aggravated because outsiders provoke the Negro to violence. They point to the abnormally high Negro contribution to the city's venereal disease rate. It never occurs to them that their own attitude has helped create these statistics. This is their city and they mean to keep it that way, come Roosevelt, come Dewey.

AS FOR the newcomers, the Roosevelt horde or the prospective Dewey horde, they must pretend to ignore the community. But they are forced to accept it as it is—at least until they or their children become proper Washingtonians themselves.

Meantime, the housing shortage forces them to buy or rent homes in restricted neighborhoods, and the inevitable embarrassment damages relations with their Jewish friends. Their children go to segregated schools and playgrounds, and the insidious clichés of prejudice and superiority seep in unnoticed. They patronize restaurants that bar Negroes, and movie theaters that Negroes cannot enter. They travel on the street-cars and buses of the Capital Transit Company, which employs Negroes only as track

hands. Only when they walk into a government building do they leave the community and enter the world in which they believe.

Here, white and black stenographers, researchers, clerks, and analysts may sit side by side, receiving equal pay for equal work. Here the government cafeterias are crowded each noon with patrons white and black, served by waitresses white and black. True, it takes the average Negro employe seven times as long to get a promotion in government service as it takes the average white employe; and only rarely is a Negro found in any really high post. But at least the fiction, and sometimes the fact, of equality is present—guaranteed by law. Even in the staid old State Department, it was possible for a Ralph Bunche to rise rapidly before he was lent to the United Nations.

When his day ends, the average white government worker returns to his closely covenanted neighborhood and his community dominated by the old-timers. The government-employed Negro goes home into the same community. He steps out of the world of potential equality and back into the Washington of rigid inequality. What the psychological effect of this abrupt daily change may be, even a layman can imagine. What it means to the community as a whole, however, only the social scientist can say.

For several years, we lived in a small house in the residential neighborhood of Georgetown—one of the many areas where population trends have been reversed, with white newcomers pushing Negroes out of their homes. Our street was a mixed one. Near us lived a young Negro woman who laundered her blouses and underthings each evening at a cold-water tap in the back yard, just beyond her outdoor privy. She could not find a better place to live. But in the government, she rated a secretary (white) and a certain degree of prestige, for she held an information job in one of the war agencies. As soon as the war ended, she hurried back to New York.

She could not remain in this city which

holds two annual marbles tournaments, one for white children and one for Negro children. The winners never play against each other; instead, the white victor is automatically declared "champion," and the Negro child is always "runner-up." She knew that she, too, could never be anything but runner-up.

The statistics on racial discrimination in the nation's capital warranted a special section in the report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights last year. "Negro schools," it said, "are inferior to white schools in almost every respect. The white school buildings have a capacity which is 27 per cent greater than actual enrollment. In the colored schools, enrollment exceeds building capacity by 8 per cent." (During the war, the OPA asked permission to use a school building at night for in-service training of its clerks. The request was denied solely because the class would have included both white and colored employees.)

As to housing, the President's Committee reported that "70 per cent of the inhabitants of the city's three worst slum areas are Negroes," and added: "The largest single slum in the District houses about 7 per cent of the white and 30 per cent of the Negro population. In 1940, one-eighth of the white dwellings in Washington and 40 per cent of those occupied by Negroes were substandard; 15 per cent of white-occupied and 38 per cent of Negro-occupied dwellings had more than one person per room."

(The cold-water, outdoor-privy Georgetown dwelling from which our Negro neighbor moved was promptly remodelled by its white owner, and rented at a high price to white tenants. The all-white Washington Real Estate Board has a "code of ethics"—unchanged by Supreme Court decisions—which prohibits its members from selling land in predominantly white areas to Negroes, and the realtors are supported in this practice by non-member dealers, banks, and loan companies. Two of the city's newspapers will not accept ads offering

property in white areas for sale to Negroes.)

In hotels, restaurants, theaters, even hospitals, foreign officials who are mistaken for American Negroes are often refused admission. "However," concludes the Committee's report, with noteworthy restraint, "once it is established that they are not Americans, they are accommodated."

Every third person in the District of Columbia is a Negro, and it is abundantly plain that this is the real reason why all Washingtonians are denied the right of self-government, of voting for President, or of being represented in Congress. The proper Washingtonians, who vigorously oppose home rule, are backed by a knot of Southern congressmen who make it their business to attend to the capital's communal affairs.

Currently the city is managed by a Board of Commissioners appointed by the President; its budget and tax structure are fixed by Congress; its five separate police forces are staffed by federal employees. Its "mayor" is a senator or representative heading a congressional District Committee, one of the least desirable (because least vote-catching) jobs on the Hill; for years, Washington's mayor was the ineffable Mr. Bilbo. The District, in other words, has less responsible or democratic government than any United States possession or even than occupied Japan or Germany.

This year an excellent bill for municipal self-government, drawn up by a Republican representative from New Jersey, died in the House amid a morass of ignorance, suspicion, and lack of interest as to its contents. The quality of its very active opposition—moved by fear of the Washington newcomers and, above all, of the Negroes—was made clear enough by Representative James C. Davis of Georgia, who said:

"Washington is a gathering-place of radicals, Communists, near-Communists, and riffraff of all types and kinds. To put the operation of the seat of the United States government into the hands of radicals who are always alert to exercise the voting privi-

lege, when good people are indifferent, would create a situation that would be intolerable. If we ever put the government here into the hands of the people who would run it under home rule, the nation's capital wouldn't be fit for a buzzard to fly over."

Nor much more than three percent of the District's population, according to current estimates, is Jewish. This small Jewish group, quite naturally, has adopted the pattern of the whole community. There are the Jewish proper Washingtonians, and there are the Jewish newcomers.

This does not mean that the older Jewish families have all integrated themselves thoroughly among the other old-timers. Washingtonians do not assimilate that easily; it would not be proper. What has happened instead, is that there has developed a certain recognition that each group, whether Jewish or Catholic or whatever, has its definite place in the community. At the top, there are the occasional figures of Jews active in the general community (usually lawyers or merchants), but on the normal middle-class level there is a quiet but firm intention of keeping to one's own kind.

Inevitably, however, the habits, the shibboleths, and the prejudices of the community have been absorbed by the Jews who are rooted in the capital. Prejudice against Negroes is as casual and common among them as it is among non-Jews. Discrimination against Negroes is as widespread among Jewish as among Christian real-estate men. Indeed, most Washingtonians believe that some of the larger and more successful Jewish realtors even discriminate quietly against Jews. Usually these rumors resist proof, although the suspicion persists.

As for anti-Semitism, it is a low-pressure tension in Washington—possibly because the high-pressure of the Negro problem satisfies most of the need for bigotry. True, there are several large stores which apparently dislike to employ Jews; and there are even one or two old-line government agencies which have the same reputation. True, too, covenants

make home-buying difficult for Jews in many districts; and several of the most desirable apartment houses cringe at the suggestion that any of their tenants might be Jews.

But, by and large, Washington's anti-Semitism is of the xenophobic kind. It is part of the community's suspicion of all outsiders, whether foreigners, Northerners, or red Indians.

For the Jewish newcomers, of course, this is hardly satisfying. So, to a large extent they refrain from the specifically Jewish communal activities; and, where they do participate, it is generally in the attempt to combat the prejudices of the proper Washingtonians—an attempt which makes the Jewish old-timers, with a few exceptions, exceedingly unhappy.

Significantly, a great many of the city's most prominent and active liberals are Jews; almost all came as public servants in government shortly before and during the war; and they have remained as progressive influences in the community itself, to play a role in changing the pattern long accepted as natural by those who were here first.

IF RACIAL discrimination is the capital's ugliest characteristic, it is by no means the only cause of psychological difficulty in Washington. Few types of employment are completely free of frustration and tension, but government service is in these respects among the worst.

Changes in hierarchy, switches in policy, budget and personnel cuts, all generate insecurity among government workers. Your typical civil servant is an unhappy kind of person—the small-town girl who sought glamor but found instead the monotony of the typewriter and the lonely rinsing of stockings each evening at her boarding house; the junior executive who breezed in with youthful New Deal zest, but is smothered now by an inflexible "job description" and the morning car-pool ride from a standardized suburban development in Maryland or Virginia; the high-level career official who approaches a middle age compounded of ulcers, congressional inquisitions, and long

evening bouts with a briefcase full of papers from the office. The heart has simply gone out of public service since the fervent days of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the war years. Few people in Washington expect the new President to restore the old zeal and excitement.

Currently, of course, the loyalty scare is the most destructive of all influences. Obviously it is necessary to make sure that the government employs no Communist party members or others whose first loyalty is to a foreign state. But, in the process of making sure, an unnecessary sense of fear has been spread through every level of government service, and has touched many thousands of non- or anti-Communist liberals. In some ways it reminds one of the atmosphere among non-Communist government officials in Prague since the coup—the fear of association with possible suspects who once were friends, the reexamination of one's past life for slips and chinks, the independent or critical ideas that go unuttered.

It is an atmosphere of hysteria which, once again, strikes the foreign visitor more forcibly than the American. A friend from London, in Washington for a few days, asked wonderingly, "What are you all afraid of? You don't really believe the Communists will take over your country, do you? Why don't you have more confidence in your own strength—and in the way of life you are broadcasting to the world?"

What he did not understand was that the fear in Washington is not so much of a Communist fifth column as of a wolf pack of politicking Congressmen. One of Mr. Dewey's first jobs will be to restore self-confidence to government workers. And it will not be easy, for there are many in his own party who hold a deep-seated suspicion of anyone on the public payroll—especially anyone who has been there during the sixteen years of Roosevelt and Truman.

So, today, it is perfectly safe to express the narrowest reactionary opinion in Washington, even to the point of un-Americanism from the Right. But it is by no means safe to talk freely in favor of civil rights, for

example, unless you are sure everyone else in the room is friendly.

Marquis Childs described recently how one government employee was brought before his department's loyalty board on charges of guilt by association—charges of which he was subsequently cleared. During the questioning he was asked whether he had made any contributions to philanthropic causes. He mentioned that he had given two hundred and fifty dollars to the United Jewish Appeal. At this a board member said, "Don't you know this shows almost too much zeal for the underdog?"

Most manifestations of the new Washington hysteria may not be quite so objectionable, but they are no less dangerous in their implications. A military intelligence officer, lecturing army reserve officers recently, stated categorically that liberalism, being "rationalistic and materialistic," is a blood-brother of Communism and therefore sinister. A one-time Western liberal, now with a hush-hush government agency, told us that he is inclined to agree with the personnel policy in his office, which virtually shuts the door to eligible American citizens whose parents were born abroad. An American Jew, just back from two years in Berlin, defended the unwritten policy which forbids the renewal of military government contracts with citizens naturalized less than ten years ago—meaning, specifically, German refugees.

Now, this frame of mind has nothing to do with Republican or Democratic party lines. It is doubtful that Mr. Dewey, if he were aware of these instances, would acknowledge ideological kinship with their implications. But it is evident that there is less independent and courageous thinking in official Washington today than at any time since the spring of 1933. This can have unfortunate effects on high-level government policy and on the Hill. Thus, it may have been pressure from the executive branch—as well as from the public—that caused Congress to consider legislation to admit DP's into the United States last winter. But, significantly enough, by sum-

merit the executive pressure had slackened, and Senator Revercomb's bill came out in the end with clear anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic overtones. Is it possible that government officials were hesitating to show almost too much zeal for the underdog?

THE restoration of self-assurance to government officials is, at least in theory, a task that could be carried out swiftly and effectively by the new Dewey administration. But no executive fiat will sweeten the community itself. That is a job for time—and for the newcomers, the immigrants into old Washington from the forty-eight states.

The arrival of the Republicans will not mean a mass exodus from the capital. Only the top officials will go, though the high-level shake-ups will undoubtedly be followed by a slower interchange of jobs lower down the scale. Thousands of Democratic office-holders, however, will either continue with the government or, as many have already done, set themselves up in the professions which feed on government—law, lobbying, public relations, trade association work, and the like. To the extent that they are here for good, they have already begun to change the face of the community. Inevitably they will begin to take a more active role on what is called, in government gobbledygook, the "local level."

Their impact is already discernible in little, unrevolutionary ways. Early this fall, for example, the city's Gallinger Hospital—hitherto restricted to white doctors—agreed to admit Negro internes from Howard Uni-

versity medical school, along with Negro attending physicians and a Negro member for the hospital's executive committee.

This year also saw the first instance of mixed boxing in the Golden Gloves and other amateur tournaments in the city (the national finals, held elsewhere, have never been segregated). Uline Arena, Washington's minor-scale Madison Square Garden, for the first time has opened its doors to Negro spectators and participants for all sports, including community ice skating. The first motion picture theater to admit patrons without segregation opened this year, as did the American Veterans Committee's non-segregated club house.

Slowly and surely, the newcomers are working themselves into Washington's civic life. They are drifting into the citizens' associations in their neighborhoods, though that takes considerable courage in the face of hostility and suspicion from the old-timers. As members of consumers' groups, of the vigorously anti-Communist Washington chapter of the American Veterans Committee, of the Americans for Democratic Action, and of other organizations, they are beginning to do battle for home rule, for breaking down restrictive practices and discriminations.

In the end, they will become old-timers themselves, and, by bringing into the mustiness of the traditional Washington the fresher winds that blow on the national scene, they may help to make Washington the community somewhat more worthy of Washington the capital.